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NEW YORK TIMES
15 June 1985

Soviet Expels a U.S. Diplomat for 'Major Espionage Action'

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Special to The New York Times

MOSCOW, June 14 — An American diplomat who Moscow says was caught in the act of spying is being expelled from the Soviet Union, the Tass press agency said today.

Tass said the action foiled "a major espionage action by the United States."

The official press agency said the diplomat, Paul M. Stombaugh, who is a political officer specializing in the Soviet Baltic republics, was detained in Moscow Thursday "in the act of committing an espionage action."

A spokesman for the United States Embassy declined to comment on the report. Mr. Stombaugh, reached by telephone, also declined to comment, but said he was not aware he was being expelled.

Tass said the diplomat was declared persona non grata and was being expelled from the Soviet Union.

The last United States diplomat to be ordered from the country was Lon David Augustenborg, Vice Consul in Leningrad, who was detained with his wife outside that city in September 1983 and accused of picking up a "spy container."

2 Months After U.S. Action

The report today came two months after the expulsion of a Soviet military attaché in Washington as a gesture of displeasure by the United States over the slaying in East Germany on March 24 of Maj. Arthur D. Nicholson Jr. by a Soviet sentry.

Moscow did not retaliate for that expulsion. There was no indication whether the expulsion announced today was related to that American action.

The brief Tass dispatch today was headlined "In the State Security Committee of the U.S.S.R." — or the K.G.B. — and said that "a major espionage action by the United States special serv-

ices against the Soviet Union was cut short."

"Materials fully exposing this staff member of the United States Embassy in engaging in espionage activity incompatible with his status were obtained in the course of the investigation," it said. The article offered no further details.

The ouster of Mr. Augustenborg and his wife, Denise, nearly two years ago was accompanied by detailed reports in newspapers and television that described their purported espionage action and depicted it as part of the "blanket espionage" said to be central to President Reagan's policy.

Other Expulsions Are Listed

Pravda, the Communist Party newspaper, said at the time that subversive activities by the United States were increasing around the world and that the Central Intelligence Agency was "prepared to do anything" to gain information destructive to the Soviet Union.

The Pravda article also described the expulsion of two other American diplomats in 1983, Richard Osborne, an economic attaché, in March, and Louis Thomas, a civilian working in the embassy's security division, in June.

Last June, a Soviet newspaper said an economics officer at the embassy, Bruce Rosenberg, was "compelled" to leave the country after being caught dealing in the black market, though it did not say he was expelled. The United States Embassy had no comment at the time on this accusation.

Last July, two American diplomats were detained by the K.G.B. after meeting with a dissident and being accused in the official press of espionage activities. No further action was taken against them, however.

In August, the Soviet press carried a spate of exposés about purported American dirty tricks against the Soviet Union that seemed designed to remind readers of the possible dangers involved in contacts with foreigners.

According to one newspaper, the United States gathers 40 to 60 percent of its information on the Soviet Union from the "personal observations of its diplomats-spies, accompanied, as a rule, by close reading of the press."

But the newspaper Sovetskaya Rossiya added, "All efforts to snoop on us through the keyhole have been broken up, as undoubtedly future efforts will be."